

## Northern Arizona University

### Inside NAU – special Earth Day edition

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#### Historic agreement boosts forest health



Fifteen years ago, forest ecologists such as **Wally Covington**, executive director of Northern Arizona University's Ecological Restoration Institute, estimated old growth ponderosa pine trees had only about 30 more years before most of them would disappear from the Southwest. These are those towering golden or orange-barked ponderosas that smell like a delicious blend of vanilla and butterscotch and lazily stretch their branches outward, as far as 20 feet in some cases. The oldest of these trees are more than 500 years old, with some living in excess of 1,000 years. These are the same trees that greeted and dazzled the first European visitors to the West. But after 100 years of suppressing fire and other land management practices, Western forests are out of balance and declining fast. Unprecedented fire storms, massive pest

infestations, disease outbreaks and drought-stressed ecosystems have conspired to take down these giants. However, with the recent agreement from community leaders, governmental organizations, environmentalists, scientists and private industry leaders about a proposed course of action to restore health to Arizona's degraded ponderosa pine forests, Covington is hopeful about landscape-scale restoration treatments that will protect old growth ponderosas and the many other important components of Western ecosystems. "The time to act is now for healthy, biologically diverse ecosystems that are assets not threats to future generations," he said. That proposed course of action is detailed in the Path Forward document, which will be submitted to the Forest Service to provide guidance to the agency as part of its ongoing 4 Forest Restoration Initiative. The document is significant because it ties together the diverse interests of a large group of individuals and organizations, including the ERI at NAU, collectively known as the 4FRI Collaborative Stakeholder Group, into one clear vision to restore about 2.4 million acres in the Kaibab, Coconino, Apache-Sitgreaves and Tonto national forests.

"What this means is we are all focused on the same goal, ultimately to return health and sustainability to Arizona's forests," said 4FRI stakeholder group member Ethan Aumack. "We are promoting the use of the best science available to restore ecological and economic health by reducing fire danger and protecting communities, returning our forests and rangelands to a healthier condition that can function with low-intensity natural fire, and providing opportunities to create jobs and stimulate

local economies.” The Path Forward outlines broad-based support for forest restoration treatments that will be designed to reduce high densities of small trees. Those small trees will be used by wood products industries, which in turn helps create jobs, enhance local economies, and reduce restoration and fire management costs. The 4 Forest Restoration Initiative seeks to treat 50,000 acres per year over a 20-year period. Historically, only about 15,000 acres a year have been treated in northern Arizona forests. The first large project planning effort associated with 4FRI is expected to begin this fall. It will be designed to cover 750,000 acres on the Mogollon Rim, guided by a landscape strategy for the entire 2.4 million acres.